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SUBJECT: IRAQI REACTION TO DECEMBER 16 TURKISH AIRSTRIKES  
IN NORTHERN IRAQ

Classified By: Political Counselor Matthew Tueller. Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: While both PM Maliki and FM Zebari were measured in their remarks in reaction to the December 16 Turkish airstrikes against PKK targets in the northern Qandil mountains, they underscored that loss of civilian lives was "unacceptable." Implying U.S. involvement in the airstrikes, KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani condemned the attacks and called on the U.S. to protect Iraqi airspace. The strongest reaction came from KRG President Massoud Barzani, who canceled his trip to Baghdad to meet with the 31 top GOI officials.  
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) Turkish airstrikes against PKK targets located in the Qandil mountains in the early hours of December 16 elicited a number of reactions from the GOI. Addressing his national security cabinet in its regular Sunday meeting the day of the strikes, PM Maliki deplored the reported loss of civilian life, calling it "unacceptable." He underscored the importance of the Turks to strike only PKK targets. The PM further added that he would convey to the GOT that any Turkish military action that harms civilians is unacceptable to the Iraqi people.

¶3. (S) Predictably, reactions from KRG leaders were stronger. In a December 17 public statement, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani called on the U.S. to protect Iraqi airspace and rein in the Turkish military. Calling the airstrikes a flagrant violation of Iraqi sovereignty and international laws, Barzani called on the UN Security Council and other international bodies to denounce the military action. Fuad Hussein, Chief of Staff to KRG President Massoud Barzani, told PolCouns that Barzani canceled his trip to Baghdad, during which time he was scheduled to meet with the 31 political leadership.

¶4. (S) At a December 17 meeting with PolMil M/C and PolCouns, FM Zebari indicated that the GOI was trying to respond to the Turkish air and artillery strikes of December 16 in a measured way by restraining its public statements and urging similar restraint from the KRG. MFA did summon the Turkish Ambassador and present a formal protest. While the strikes did appear to target PKK bases and headquarters, some of the attacks hit villages, destroying a clinic, a hospital, and several small bridges, killing one woman and wounding several others according to the FM. Zebari plans to call FM Babacan and urged PM Maliki to call PM Erdogan. If Turkish attacks continue to cause such collateral damage and civilian casualties, this would be "very negative" warned Zebari.

¶5. (S) The GOT followed up the December 16 strike with

another strike in the Zap region the afternoon of December 17. Battle Damage Assessment on that strike, which took place around noon local time, is not yet available and may be difficult, given current weather conditions.

16. (S) Comment: The strikes came at the same time as a significant breakthrough on Article 140 implementation, which will determine the status of Kirkuk and disputed territories, an issue of great concern to Turkey. The 3 1 GOI leaders and KRG PM Barzani this week agreed to invite UNAMI to provide technical assistance, thus defusing the end-of-year political crisis on missing the referendum deadline. High civilian casualties or strikes that are perceived as outside PKK areas could put this agreement in jeopardy. End Comment.

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